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ABSTRACT

The beginning and development of libraries in Nigeria are reviewed. Particular areas discussed include: libraries before mid-century, librarians before mid-century, the difficulties of birth, libraries as instruments of power, early library men, the Lagos Library, the Carnegie Corporation, World War II, Elliot Commission, Lagos Public Library, national library concept rejected, a national bibliography, a traveling librarian, and birth of a profession. Although the profession of librarianship was born in Nigeria between 1949 and 1950, the christening did not take place until 1953, when the West African Library Association was formed. (Author/NH)

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LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANSHIP

IN NIGERIA

AT MID-CENTURY

A paper read at the Nigerian Library Association Conference, Lagos, April 2, 1970,

by John Harris

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LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANSHIP
IN NIGERIA
AT MID-CENTURY

The theme of this Conference is "Twenty years of librarianship in Nigeria", and I have been asked to speak today about the first of those years - the years of its birth. The choice fell on me presumably because I am the oldest one amongst you. As to the date of birth there seems to be some doubt. Mr Bankole, when he approached me on behalf of the Conference Programme Committee, spoke of marking the coming of age of professional librarianship. If this is the same for professions as for human beings then it must today be twenty-one years old and in that case birth must be assumed to have taken place in 1949. Mr Bankole, however, spoke of mid-century, and the Conference theme certainly says 'twenty years' which takes us to the year 1950. So, 1949 or 1950? Somewhere there appears to be a lack of precision. But librarians are always precise, and to suggest anything else at a moment of professional maturity would be a serious matter. It must be concluded, therefore, that it was the birth itself which was lacking in precision.

This certainly fits the facts of birth as I remember them. The labour was great and extended over a considerable period of time. As one of the midwives, perhaps the only one present who assisted in that delivery, I speak with authority. For a long time, and it might be anything up to twelve months, the child which was struggling to be born hung uncertainly betwixt and between the womb of library pregnancy and the hard facts of professional life. The term mid-century is therefore precise enough. We can take it that between 1949 and 1950 there was born in Nigeria a new profession - new in this country, that is - the profession of librarianship. The christening did not take place until three years later, in 1953, when a professional association was formed, the West African Library Association.[1]

LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANSHIP IN NIGERIA AT MID-CENTURY

LIBRARIES BEFORE MID-CENTURY

I am well aware that even this dating - elastic though it is - is debatable. There were libraries in Nigeria before mid-century. The Lagos Public Library, The Lagos Library, better known by its later name of Lagos Lending Library, the Tom Jones, the Secretariat, Henry Carr's personal library; others also: institutional libraries such as those at the Higher College, Yaba; the Central Medical Library, also at Yaba; the Geological Survey Library at Kaduna; and libraries of agriculture and forestry at the respective Government departments in Ibadan.

Finally, what is often overlooked — though not at this Conference — there were libraries in the North before Nigeria itself came into existence. The full extent of those is still not known — a reflection, perhaps, on our professional maturity, but since Kensdale's article in WALA News, June 1955, there has been no excuse for not knowing of their existence.[2] The knowledge has widened considerably since then.

LIBRARIANS BEFORE MID-CENTURY

Obviously it wasn't libraries that achieved birth in 1950. Nor was it librarianship. There had been librarians in the country for some years. The British Council, which opened a Lagos office in 1943, proceeded to establish a library and it was their Librarian, Miss K.D. Ferguson, who became the first head of the Lagos Public Library, which was run jointly by the British Council and the Lagos Town Council.[3] Before 1950 Miss Ferguson had been followed by one or two others. In 1947 Miss Doris Forsythe was appointed to catalogue Henry Carr's library which had been acquired by the Nigerian Government as the possible basis of a national library. In 1948 a University College was founded at Ibadan, with provision for library and librarian well in advance of normal university practice at the time. For the first time the country had a library under the umbrella of an officially constituted Nigerian institution. And by the end of that same year the University College had two experienced librarians at work, Miss Forsythe and myself.[4]

LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANSHIP IN NIGERIA AT MID-CENTURY

With a public library in Lagos and a University library in Ibadan, it might seem that the birth of librarianship was already complete. This would, I think be a premature judgement. The mere founding of a library, even the appointment of a librarian, do not in themselves carry assurance of continued growth, let alone the birth of a profession. In West Africa infant mortality, whether human or institutional, is something to be reckoned with. Moreover, the Lagos Public Library had no solid foundations. Its administration by the British Council was a temporary expedient that could not be expected to continue. As for the University College, it was a new type of institution for Nigeria, and its library even more so. Its governing body and everything about it was 'provisional'. Its appointed Librarian arrived in the country only a week or so before the year's end.

Looking at the library scene in Nigeria in 1948 we would have to admit the presence of both libraries and librarianship but as to how securely established, that was decidedly questionable. There had been expectations before, and in the end they had come to nothing.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF BIRTH

In fact this child of ours was trying to enter a world in many ways alien to it. Strong forces were opposed to it and these we must now examine if we are to understand the difficulties of that birth. In doing so we must remember that libraries are social phenomena. A collection of books only becomes a library in the proper sense when it has been organized for use by readers. This is the distinguishing feature of a library, the function of bringing together books and information on the one hand and people on the other. A collection of books becomes a medium of communication. The process of conversion from one to the other, the process by which the raw materials, the printed books and documents and records in various forms, are transmuted into a social organism, an instrument for the use of society, that is librarianship. I stress this point because we who work in libraries, who are the makers of libraries, because we are so much part of the organism

very easily cease after a time to be aware of the fact. We see the machinery, we make it work, we perform our miracle of transmutation, we satisfy the individual reader, and amidst it all overlook the grand design, the social role, the part the library plays in enriching and even transforming the world of which it is part.

LIBRARIES ARE INSTRUMENTS OF POWER

If we forget this as individual librarians it is natural enough. But to forget it as a profession is fatal to the profession. For libraries are instruments of power, potent with all the explosive thoughts of mankind, and like all powerful instruments they must be handled with respect, understanding and caution.

If librarians sometimes overlook this, there are others who do not. Those in the seats of power have always understood it. It was they after all who first made use of the library as an instrument of their power over others, the priests and divine kings of Egypt, the emperors and kings of Assyria, the rulers of the ancient Greek world, the Church and State of mediaeval Europe. And when, in modern times, democracy claimed library privileges for all men there was strong resistance, mainly from those who had hitherto had them to themselves, and who objected to being taxed so that other men might enjoy them also.

It was amidst this struggle for library development that the library profession as we know it has grown, a struggle in which men have manoeuvered for control over an instrument of social power, some working to retain it for themselves, others to make it more widely accessible to the people as a whole, some even to pervert it to tyrannical ends through censorship and control of its contents.

A library profession can only come to full development in a society favourable to libraries for the many. It is not merely a matter of being born but of finding circumstances favourable to the profession's growth. In our case these have been far from easy. The profession, in Nigeria as

elswhere, has found itself between two opposing forces, those who have wanted libraries and fought to establish them, and those who have resisted either their coming or their expansion. On this battlefield the drama of our birth has been played out. The full story has yet to be pieced together and here I can only give the broad outline.

EARLY LIBRARY MEN

First of what we may call the 'library men' of Nigeria was Henry Carr, already buying books and making a personal library when a student at Fourah Bay College in the 1870's. Throughout his long life he was the staunch protagonist of a richer life for his fellow countrymen, and to Henry Carr the greatest riches were to be found in books. This was exemplified in the library which over the years he assembled in his house in Tinubu Square, Lagos, so assiduously and so unsparing of personal expense that it numbered at his death in 1945 some 18,000 volumes. This was a private library. It is true that it was open to those who knew him, true also that he always spoke of it as the basis for a future national library. But Henry Carr was a reserved man and I think it would be correct to say that his books served more readers after his death than ever they did in his lifetime. Nor were the books organized for other than private use. There was no catalogue, no classification, no machinery for lending. And there is evidence that as he grew older Henry Carr's natural reserve was deepened and he was driven more into himself and away from the sharing of his books with others.[5]

This was due largely to the friction that developed between him and the other great Nigerian 'library'man' of his own generation, Herbert Macaulay. Macaulay was many things that Henry Carr was not. He was extrovert, passionate, radical. He sought the public eye, he was a writer rather than a reader. He was an owner of books, certainly, but never a book collector; yet curiously he is destined, I believe, to be remembered for his collection long after all Henry Carr's books have crumbled to dust.

There was nothing very remarkable, let alone unique, about the books that Carr collected. Macaulay on the other hand in the course of a busy public and political life amassed documents, pamphlets, newspapers, and all the ephemera of his times, material which is now forever a rich mine for the historian of Nigeria and its struggle for independence.[7]

If these two 'library men' could have combined, the story of libraries in Nigeria might well have been different.

THE LAGOS LIBRARY

Around the early twenties appears the third of our 'library men', a European this time, a colonial civil servant named Alan Burns, later to become Sir Alan Burns, Governor of the Gold Coast, and best known to librarians as author of the first standard History of Nigeria.

During his first spell of duty in Nigeria he relates how he "tried in vain to persuade the Governor that government funds could well be spent on a public library for Lagos".[8] This Governor must have been Sir Hugh Clifford (Governor, 1919-24); before 1919 the Governor was Lugard and nobody who knew Lugard's views on expenditure would dream of approaching him on the subject. Clifford was a very different type, author of many novels, friendly with Henry Carr, and a man of liberal views who might have been expected to be well disposed towards Burns and his plea for libraries.

Burns was moved to the Bahamas in 1924 and only returned to Nigeria in 1929, this time as Deputy Chief Secretary. It was not a period when the colonial government was sympathetic to local aspirations and Burns wasted no more efforts in trying to interest colonial governors. This time he went to the Carnegie Corporation and their response was favourable. A grant of $6,000 was made, Burns convened a meeting, a committee was elected of which Henry Carr was a member, and Burns chairman, and on 29 September 1932 the Lagos Library was opened for the use of members. Like the Tom Jones this was a subscription library, but unlike the Tom Jones

it was a successful one. It was still going strong at mid-century and when the National Museum was built one wing was given over to this library. For all these years it filled a need - the need for light reading, fiction, biography and current affairs. The members came almost entirely from the civil service and the professions and no attempt seems ever to have been made to broaden the library's basis. By the nineteen-thirties anyone acquainted with library history could have foreseen that no library of this type could be expected to serve any wider social purpose, and it is curious that the Carnegie Corporation, experienced as they were by that time in the development of libraries, should have allowed their money to be spent in this way. Burns must have been very persuasive.

Except for the narrow interests of its members and as an example of a type of library already approaching extinction in other parts of the world, the Lagos Library has played no part in the library history of Nigeria. It has never employed a professional librarian, its staff have been concerned only with the most routine and non-professional procedures, the charging and discharging of loans. Its influence has if anything hindered real library development by diverting the energies of men like Burns and Carr which could have been used to more effective social and national purpose. And yet it is to be noted that owing to the influence of its members it has always been able to command the attention of high authorities. By the second year of its existence it was able to move into what is described as "more suitable premises in the grounds of Government House".[9] And later, as I have said, it was provided for in the Lagos National Museum.

THE CARNEGIE CORPORATION

One achievement there was however, resulting from this effort by Burns and Carr: it brought onto the West African scene the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Henceforth this foundation is always in the library picture, assisting with surveys, subsidising projects, financing

investigations, and as the latest and most generous of their gestures, fathering a school of librarianship.[10] Without them the present situation of librarianship in Nigeria might have been bleak indeed.

After their initial grant the Corporation was asked for more. Wisely, this time, they declined until they could have a survey made of West Africa as a whole. This brought them into touch with both the British and the colonial governments and the correspondence that ensued reveals in a fascinating way the attitude to libraries of these governments. The British Government, through the person of its then Colonial Secretary, Malcolm Macdonald, was only too ready for its colony to use Carnegie money. It was not prepared to spend a penny itself.

"I do not wish", wrote the Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Governor of Nigeria, Bourdillon, 8Nov. 1939, "I do not wish to give the impression that I should desire Colonial Governments to incur themselves more than a small outlay upon the subject at the moment". He was notifying Nigeria of a Carnegie grant for libraries.[11]

In Nigeria official opinion fully concurred with this view. On 12 April 1940 the Lagos Secretariat informed the Colonial Office that the proposed Carnegie grant was of little practical value. African reading interests, they declared, were "too limited and too closely associated with personal advancement to justify expenditure on reading materials of broader scope."[12] As though Nigerians had ever been given the opportunity to see "materials of broader scope" and decide for themselves!

That was the opinion of the Secretariat. It was not the opinion of all Nigerians. An opposite view was voiced with his accustomed force by Dr Azikiwe, and the library struggle began to gather momentum.

WORLD WAR II

Support for libraries came from an unexpected source, a world war. In the course of World War II there emerged in Britain, now fighting for its life and forced to fresh perceptions, new attitudes towards many things, including her colonies. In particular the minds of colonial peoples assumed a new significance for their governors. Public Relations became an office of

government, and the British Council was launched to spread British culture, British ideas, and therefore British books to all peoples whose understanding and friendship was required. For Public Relations Offices and for the British Council, libraries and reading rooms because the obvious media of communication.

The British Council opened its first Nigerian office in 1943, in Lagos. Its representative was soon started on a dialogue with the colonial government on the subject of a national library, and with the Lagos Town Council on that of a public library for the city.[13] The Public Relations Office established reading rooms in the larger centres throughout the country and supplied them with newspapers, official bulletins, publicity literature about the war, and even more solid fare in the form of books when they were available.

All this occurred at a time when there was still not a single librarian at work in the country.

Meanwhile the Carnegie Corporation had completed one survey, by Hanns Vischer and Margaret Wrong, had decided that West Africa was ready for library development, and had commissioned from a Miss Ethel Fegan a second report on how to go about it.[14]

At this point in our drama the stage was occupied by the following figures:-

The British Council
The Carnegie Corporation
The Government of Nigeria
The Lagos Town Council

Slightly off stage was the British Imperial Government; and in the wings were the now aging figures of Henry Carr and Herbert Macaulay. The mantle of the latter was already falling on the new figure of Dr Azikiwe.

ELLIOT COMMISSION

So far the theme had been confined to public libraries. Nobody at

this time had considered any other type of library worth discussion in Nigeria. But suddenly, in 1944, just as the British Council was coming to terms with the Lagos Town Council, another figure appeared in the form of a Commission sent by the Secretary of State for the Colonies "to report on the organization and facilities of the existing centres of higher education in British West Africa, and to make recommendations regarding future university development in that area". The chairman was Walter Elliot.[15]

The report of this Commission did two things for librarianship in Nigeria. First, it revealed the poverty of existing educational library facilities.[16] Secondly, in its recommendations it not only emphasised the need for an adequate library in the university which was proposed for Ibadan,[17] but also supported a principle that was still being fought over in the university world elsewhere, the principle that a university librarian should have academic status, that he should be of professorial rank, and be an ex-officio member of the Academic Board. This concept was later accepted in all the new British universities which were founded. It has, I believe, done more than anything else to ensure a high standing for librarians in West Africa.[18]

By October 1948 the University College proposed for Nigeria was in existence at Ibadan.

LAGOS PUBLIC LIBRARY

Meanwhile the British Council was operating the Lagos Public Library on behalf of the Lagos Town Council. There was still some effort by those who hoped that the Government could be persuaded to accept responsibility for library development at a national level. They had secured the establishment of a Standing Committee to advise the Government on Libraries, and this Committee in 1948 laid before Government their detailed proposals for a National Library. These were approved by the Chief Secretary, at that time Sir Hugh Foot, and forwarded to the British Government, but no action over eventuated.[19] By 1950 all hope of advance in that direction seems to have

been abandoned for the time being. The Imperial Government was happy to leave such matters to the Carnegie Corporation, though one at least of its colonial servants in Nigeria still tried to make them see reason. Mr J.O. Field, later Commissioner for Western Cameroons, stated the matter bluntly:- "It was not intended that the Carnegie grant should be used to finance the new Scheme - in fact one of the main objects of that Scheme was to drive home the point that Government ... must accept full financial responsibility for library services themselves and that they cannot expect to go on doing it on cheap grants from Carnegie, the British Council or anyone else. The whole trouble in the past, and quite clearly a considerable part of the trouble now, is the failure to realise that there have got to be libraries and that part of the available public revenue has got to be appropriated to their establishment and maintenance".[20]

NATIONAL LIBRARY CONCEPT REJECTED

The National Library concept, however, got no further at this time. And lest anyone think that only the British Government was to blame, it should be added that it got precisely the same treatment when it was raised again with the country's first representative Government. In 1952 the Council of Ministers decided against acceptance of library development as a responsibility of central government. "It takes the view", the Council stated, "that it must be Regional, local and private organizations, which increase library facilities throughout the territory".[21]

From all this something, however, was saved. The Lagos Town Council in 1950 took over from the British Council full responsibility for the Lagos Public Library, and plans were put into operation for sending Nigerian staff overseas for training. The first to go was Kalu Okorie, the second Gbole Nwikina, and the third Mrs Oku. The first qualified Nigerian librarians were in the pipe-line.[22]

A NATIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Other events there were also which contributed to the birth of librarianship, in particular the Publications Ordinance 1950, which was the first evidence of official interest in a national bibliography.[23] In the same year the Ibadan University Library was able to acquire by purchase the library of Herbert Macaulay. This gave the opportunity for a development of some historic significance. The Macaulay collection, which as I have said was rich in documents and papers, was joined with others of African interest, the Charles Orr Memorial Library, the Henry Carr and Montagae Dyke African material and the Publications Ordinance material. The collection that resulted was organized as a special Africana Library and announced in the Library's Annual Report, 1950/51.[24] It was the forerunner of many such collections, not only in Nigeria but in North America, Britain, and the world at large. It afforded facilities for African research and is an interesting example of the way in which libraries can give a lead to lines of university research.

Further evidence of the emergence of librarianship was forthcoming from Ibadan:- (i) two publications, the first of their kind: a Preliminary List of Serials in the Library (1949),[25] and A Guide to the Library (1950);[26] (ii) the acquisition of a microcard reader in 1950, possibly the first such machine in any library in the British Commonwealth;[27] (iii) the celebration in December 1949 of the accessioning of the 10,000th volume.[28] Nigeria at last had the basis for a scholarly research library, and for a national bibliography, as well as an effective staff to handle them.

A TRAVELLING LIBRARIAN

But the event which beyond all others was significant to our profession of librarianship was something else, something quite outside the normal scope of a university library. In 1949 the Government of the Western Region suddenly found itself the employer of a 'Travelling Librarian'. This Librarian arrived unexpectedly, nobody knew what to do with her, the relevant files were lost, and the University Library was asked to give her

a corner to sit in while the Government figured what to do about it. The matter was soon out of their hands. If the Government didn't know what to do the 'Travelling Librarian' did. She was soon travelling, visiting every corner of the Region, inspecting reading rooms, summing up the situation and planning a regional service. She retained her relationship with the University Library and before many months had passed joint action was being taken in the organization of what was called a "Training Course for N.A. Librarians". This was held in August 1950 at the University and attended by 30 N.A. Library Attendants and 15 of the junior staff of the University Library. No less than five professional librarians participated: Miss Parkes (the Travelling Librarian), Miss Carnell (formerly Organizing Tutor for the N.Z. Library Association who had just arrived as Deputy Librarian), Miss Petticrew (newly appointed Reference Librarian in the University Library), Miss Mullane (British Council) and myself. Other tutors were Chief Solaru of the Oxford University Press, and Dr Robert Gardiner, then Director of Extra Mural Studies, now head of the E.C.A.[29]

BIRTH OF A PROFESSION

This event exemplified something new in Nigeria's library history. As I have tried to show there were already libraries and librarians. Even librarianship was beginning to prove itself. But you can have all these without a library profession. There have often enough in history been quite respectable libraries, with quite accomplished librarians working in them, displaying perfectly competent librarianship, without the combination adding up to the existence of a profession. Before the event of which I speak the few librarians in the country were isolated, and closely engaged in the work of their individual libraries. Now, for the first time, they were brought together on a common task, and it was a task which touched the very heart of professionalism.

Some years ago a president of the Library Association (London) in his presidential address spoke on the professional aspects of librarianship.

From a book by Lewis and Maude, Professional people, he quoted the attributes which they claimed to be the distinguishing marks of a profession.[30] The two most important of these, without which a profession cannot exist, are:-

1. A body of knowledge and of skills held in common and continually extended by united effort.

2. An educational process based on that common knowledge and those common skills, in the ordering or applying of which the professional group has a recognized responsibility.

In Ibadan, in August 1949, a group of experienced librarians, from different countries and different types of library, got together, considered how their knowledge and skills could best be adapted to the Nigerian situation, and then proceeded to impart them to Nigerians.

A small booklet was compiled afterwards and published in Ibadan by the Western Provinces Education Department. This was Notes on Method for N.A. Librarians, by Joan Parkes.[31] It preserves something of what was taught on that occasion. For us today it is a historic document, the precursor of all those grand developments of a later day, departments and institutes of librarianship, professional journals and a professional association now contemplating, in proposals before this Conference, an army of paid officials and a palatial building.

With that modest meeting of librarians and library attendants, with that little paper-covered publication on elementary library method, was born the profession of librarianship in Nigeria, approximately twenty-one years ago.

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